

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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E.O. 11652: N/A

AGS: PINT, ELAB, CE

SUBJ: CARETAKER GOVERNMENT FACES LABOR UNREST

REF: COLOMBO 71

1. SUMMARY: A NATIONWIDE RAILWAY STRIKE IS THE MOST SERIOUS
OF A FLURRY OF TRADE UNION ACTIONS WHICH ARE CAUSING SOME
DISRUPTION OF THE ECONOMY AND ARE POTENTIALLY THREATENING TO
THE FRAGILE STABILITY OF THE SRI LANKAN POLITICAL SYSTEM IN
THE SEVEN WEEKS REMAINING BEFORE ELECTIONS. WITH THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY DISSOLVED, MRS. BANDARANAIKE'S CARETAKER GOVERNMENT
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HAS PROTESTED THAT IT HAS NO BUDGETARY LEEWAY TO MEET THE
WAGE DEMANDS OF RAILWAYMEN, AND BY EXTENSION THE EQUALLY-
VOCAL BANK CLERKS, DOCTORS, AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS WHO
CLAIM THAT PREVIOUS COMMITMENTS MADE TO THEM HAVE NOT
BEEN KEPT. A CONTINUED BACKLOG IN COLOMBO PORT, WHILE NOT DIRECTLY
ATTRIBUTABLE TO CURRENT LABOR UNREST, ADDS TO THE ATMOSPHERE OF CONFU
SION.

UNLIKE LAST JANUARY'S WAVE OF STRIKES,
THERE IS NO SIGN THAT OPPOSITION POLITICIANS ARE
ENCOURAGING THE UNIONS; THAT FACT AND THE LOWER LEVEL
OF DISRUPTION COMPARED TO JANUARY MAKES IT LESS LIKELY
NOW THAT DRASTIC ACTION -- SUCH AS A RE-DECLARATION OF
THE EMERGENCY-- IS BEING CONSIDERED. END SUMMARY.

2. THE COMBINATION OF A STRIKE BY RAILWAY REPAIRMEN
AND A "WORK TO RULE" BY TRAIN GUARDS HAS PARALYZED THE
TRAIN SYSTEM THROUGHOUT SRI LANKA FOR THE
PAST WEEK.
SKELETON SERVICES ARE BEING MAINTAINED ON TRUNK ROUTES
BUT STOCKS OF FOOD AND FULE ARE LOW IN SOME AREAS OUTSIDE
COLOMBO AND LONG-DISTANCE AS WELL AS COMMUTER SERVICE HAS
BEEN SERIOUSLY DISRUPTED. THE RESULTANT STRAIN FALLS ON A BUS SYSTEM
THAT
IS CROWDED AT THE BEST OF TIMES. THE GOVERNMENT ISSUED A JUNE 1
BACK-TO-WORK CALL WHICH WARNED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD
NOT ABDICATE ITS DUTY TO MAINTAIN LAW AND ORDER AND TO
ENSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF ESSENTIAL GOODS AND SERVICES.
THE COMMUNIQUE ARGUED THAT THE PRESENT CARETAKER GOVERNMENT
CANNOT UNDERTAKE SUBSTANTIAL NEW FINANCIAL COMMITMENTS WITH-
OUT THE APPROVAL OF THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY, WHICH HAS
BEEN DISSOLVED PENDING ELECTIONS SCHEDULED FOR JULY 21.
NEVERTHELESS SOME SALARY CONCESSIONS WERE OFFERED AND
WORKERS WERE TOLD THAT THIS WAS THE "FINAL APPEAL" TO
RAILWAY EMPLOYEES TO RESUME WORK.

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3. BESIDES THE RAIL STRIKERS, OTHER GROUPS ARE MAKING
THEIR GRIEVANCES KNOWN IN A VOCAL WAY. THE LARGEST
NEWSPAPER CHAIN, THE GOVERNMENT-DOMINATED LAKE HOUSE,
DID NOT PUBLISH MAY 28 IN A DEMONSTRATION OF STRENGTH
BY OPPOSITION EMPLOYEES WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION. UNITED
NATIONAL PARTY UNIONS AS WELL AS SEVERAL LEFTIST
UNIONS (THE CEYLON FEDERATION OF LABOR AND THE CEYLON
MERCANTILE UNION) IN THE WORKS AND TRANSPORT SECTION OF
THE PUBLISHING HOUSE STRUCK WORK IN PROTEST AGAINST
THE ONE-SIDED POLITICAL REPORTING IN THE PAPERS. THEY
RETURNED TO WORK THE NEXT DAY AND THERE HAS SINCE BEEN
A C
EAR INCREASE IN THE COVERAGE OF SPEECHES BY OPPOSITION
POLITICAL LEADERS.

4. 4. GOVERNMENT DOCTORS HAVE CALLED A STRIKE FROM JUNE 2 AND
HAVE ANNOUNCED THEIR INTENTION OF WITHHOLDING CARE EVEN
FROM THEIR EMERGENCY PATIENTS AFTER THE FIRST 24 HOURS OF
THE STRIKE. THE DOCTORS MAINTAIN THAT CONCESSIONS GRANTED

TO THEM AT THE TIME OF THEIR LAST "WORK-TO-RULE" HAVE NOT BEEN CARRIED OUT. SINCE THE FEW, EXPENSIVE PRIVATE HOSPITALS ARE UNABLE TO COPE WITH THE DEMAND FOR HEALTH SERVICES, THE RESULTING CHAOS WILL NO DOUBT FORCE THE GOVERNMENT TO SETTLE OR SUPPRESS THE STRIKE QUICKLY. UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS ARE ANOTHER PROFESSIONAL GROUP WHO HAVE TURNED TO LABOR AGITATION. IN PROTEST AGAINST CONTINUED UNWILLINGNESS OF THE GOVERNMENT TO RECONSIDER THEIR PAY SCALES, PROFESSORS HAVE REFUSED TO DO ADMINISTRATIVE WORK AND WITHIN THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS HAVE RESIGNED EN MASSE FROM THEIR NON-ACADEMIC POSITIONS AS DEANS, HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS, ETC. WHILE FURTHER UPSETTING ACADEMIC SCHEDULES, THE TEACHERS' PORTEST WILL HAVE NO SERIOUS EFFECTS ON THE COUNTRY AT LARGE. IN A POTENTIALLY MORE TROUBLESOME AREA, THE OFTEN-MILITANT BANK CLEARKS HAVE THREATENED TO STRIKE AS OF JUNE 22 UNLESS THE GOVERNMENT TAKES ACTION ON THEIR LONG-STANDING DEMANDS.

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A CONTINUING BACKLOG OF FROM 10-20 SHIPS AWAITING BERTHS IN COLOMBO PORT ADDS ANOTHER ELEMENT OF CONFUSION TO THE LABOR SCENE. THE BACKLOG HAS PERSISTED SINCE BEFORE THE SINHALA/TAMIL NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS OF MID-APRIL WHEN IT WAS AGGRAVATED BY A GO-SLOW IN THE FERTILIZER CORPORATION AND IN THE STEVEDORE UNIONS. ALTHOUGH THOSE HAVE SINCE ENDED, THE LINEUP OUTSIDE THE PORT IS AS LONG AS EVER.

6. THESE LABOR AGITATIONS HAVE NOT REACHED THE STAGE WHERE THEY ARE SERIOUSLY DISRUPTING LIFE IN COLOMBO IN A WAY THAT THE DECEMBER/JANUARY RAIL STRIKE DID (REFTEL). THERE IS ALSO NOT THE EVIDENCE THERE WAS THEN OF MANIPULATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE TRADE UNIONS FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES (ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT IS ATTRIBUTING ULTERIOR POLITICAL MOTIVES TO THE STRIKERS). THERE IS AS YET NO SIGN OTHER THAN THE "RESUME WORK" APPEAL THAT THE PRIME MINISTER SEES THE CURRENT STRIKES AS A SERIOUS THREAT TO PUBLIC ORDER OR THAT ANY SERIOUS SUPPRESSIVE MEASURES ARE BEING CONSIDERED. SHE HAS FEW OPTIONS, HOWEVER, IF THE RAILWAY WORKERS ARE ADAMANT. DURING JANUARY'S AGITATION AN ONGOING STATE OF EMERGENCY ALLOWED SPECIAL REGULATIONS, INCLUDING CENSORSHIP, TO BE IMPOSED. HOWEVER, THE EMERGENCY HAS SINCE LAPSED.

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